Living the Gospel of Life: A Challenge to American Catholics

A Statement by the Catholic Bishops of the United States

Brothers and sisters in the Lord:

At the conclusion of the 1998 ad limina visits of the bishops of the United States, our Holy Father Pope John Paul II spoke these words:

> *Today I believe the Lord is saying to us all: do not hesitate, do not be afraid to engage the good fight of the faith (cf. I Tim 6:12). When we preach the liberating message of Jesus Christ we are offering the words of life to the world. Our prophetic witness is an urgent and essential service not just to the Catholic community but to the whole human family.*

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I consecrated you; a prophet to the nations I appointed you. --Jeremiah 1:5

In this statement we attempt to fulfill our role as teachers and pastors in proclaiming the Gospel of Life. We are confident that the proclamation of the truth in love is an indispensable way for us to exercise our pastoral responsibility.

I. The American Century

1. When Henry Luce published his appeal for an "American century" in 1941, he could not have known how the coming reality would dwarf his dream. Luce hoped that the "engineers, scientists, doctors . . . builders of roads [and] teachers" of the United States would spread across the globe to promote economic success and American ideals: "a love of freedom, a feeling for the quality of opportunity, a tradition of self-reliance and independence and also cooperation."[1] Exactly this, and much more, has happened in the decades since. U.S. economic success has reshaped the world. But the nobility of the American experiment flows from its founding principles, not from its commercial power. In this century alone, hundreds of thousands of Americans have died defending those principles.

"Your country stands upon the world scene as a model of a democratic society at an advanced stage of development. Your power of example carries with it heavy responsibilities. Use it well, America!" --Pope John Paul II, Newark, 1995

Hundreds of thousands more have lived lives of service to those principles -- both at home and on other continents -- teaching, advising and providing humanitarian assistance to people in need. As Pope John Paul has observed, "At the center of the moral vision of [the American] founding documents is the recognition of the rights of the human person . . ." The greatness of the United States lies "especially [in its] respect for the dignity and sanctity of human life in all conditions and at all stages of development."[2]

2. This nobility of the American spirit endures today in those who struggle for social justice and equal opportunity for the disadvantaged. The United States has thrived because, at its best, it embodies a commitment to human freedom, human rights and human dignity. This is why the Holy Father tells us: ". . . [As] Americans, you are rightly proud of your country's great achievements."[3]

3. But success often bears the seeds of failure. U.S. economic and military power has sometimes led to grave injustices abroad. At home, it has fueled self-absorption, indifference and consumerist excess. Overconfidence in our power, made even more pronounced by advances in science and technology, has created the illusion of a life without natural boundaries and actions without consequences. The standards of the marketplace, instead of being guided by sound morality, threaten to displace it. We are now witnessing the gradual restructuring of American culture according to ideals of utility, productivity and cost-effectiveness. It is a culture where moral questions are submerged by a river of goods and services and where the misuse of marketing and public relations subverts public life.

4. The losers in this ethical sea change will be those who are elderly, poor, disabled and politically marginalized. None of these pass the utility test; and yet, they at least have a presence. They at least have the possibility of organizing to be heard. *Those who are unborn, infirm and terminally ill have no such advantage*. They have no "utility," and worse, they have no voice. As we tinker with the beginning, the end and even the intimate cell structure of life, we tinker with our own identity as a free nation dedicated to the dignity of the human person. When American political life becomes an experiment on people rather than for and by them, it will no longer be worth conducting. We are arguably moving closer to that day. Today, when the inviolable rights of the human person are proclaimed and the value of life publicly affirmed, the most basic human right, "the right to life, is being denied or trampled upon, especially at the more significant moments of existence: the moment of birth and the moment of death" (Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life [Evangelium Vitae]*, 18).

5. The nature and urgency of this threat should not be misunderstood. Respect for the dignity of the human person demands a commitment to human rights across a broad spectrum: "Both as Americans and as followers of Christ, American Catholics must be committed to the defense of life in all its stages and in every condition."[4] The culture of death extends beyond our shores: famine and starvation, denial of health care and development around the world, the deadly violence of armed conflict and the scandalous arms trade that spawns such conflict. Our nation is witness to domestic violence, the spread of drugs, sexual activity which poses a threat to lives, and a reckless tampering with the world's ecological balance. Respect for human life calls us to defend life from these and other threats. It calls

us as well to enhance the conditions for human living by helping to provide food, shelter and meaningful employment, beginning with those who are most in need. We live the Gospel of Life when we live in solidarity with the poor of the world, standing up for their lives and dignity. Yet abortion and euthanasia have become preeminent threats to human dignity because they directly attack life itself, the most fundamental human good and the condition for all others. They are committed against those who are weakest and most defenseless, those who are genuinely "the poorest of the poor." They are endorsed increasingly without the veil of euphemism, as supporters of abortion and euthanasia freely concede these are killing even as they promote them. Sadly, they are practiced in those communities which ordinarily provide a safe haven for the weak -- the family and the healing professions. Such direct attacks on human life, once crimes, are today legitimized by governments sworn to protect the weak and marginalized.

6. It needn't be so. God, the Father of all nations, has blessed the American people with a tremendous reservoir of goodness. He has also graced our founders with the wisdom to establish political structures enabling all citizens to participate in promoting the inalienable rights of all. As Americans, as Catholics and as pastors of our people, we write therefore today *to call our fellow citizens back to our country's founding principles*, and most especially *to renew our national respect for the rights of those who are unborn, weak, disabled and terminally ill*. Real freedom rests on the inviolability of every person as a child of God. The inherent value of human life, at every stage and in every circumstance, is not a sectarian issue any more than the Declaration of Independence is a sectarian creed.

7. In a special way, we call on U.S. Catholics, especially those in positions of leadership -- whether cultural, economic or political -- to recover their identity as followers of Jesus Christ and to be leaders in the renewal of American respect for the sanctity of life. "Citizenship" in the work of the Gospel is also a sure guarantee of responsible citizenship in American civic affairs. Every Catholic, without exception, should remember that he or she is called by our Lord to proclaim His message. Some proclaim it by word, some by action and all by example. But every believer shares responsibility for the Gospel. Every Catholic is a missionary of the Good News of human dignity redeemed through the cross. While our personal vocation may determine the form and style of our witness, Jesus calls each of us to be a leaven in society, and we will be judged by our actions. No one, least of all someone who exercises leadership in society, can rightfully claim to share fully and practically the Catholic faith and yet act publicly in a way contrary to that faith.

8. Our attitude toward the sanctity of life in these closing years of the "American century" will say volumes about our true character as a nation. It will also shape the discourse about the sanctity of human life in the next century, because what happens here, in our nation, will have global consequences. It is primarily U.S. technology, U.S. microchips, U.S. fiber-optics, U.S. satellites, U.S. habits of thought and entertainment, which are building the neural network of the new global mentality. What America has indelibly imprinted on the emerging global culture is its spirit. And the ambiguity of

that spirit is why the Pope appealed so passionately to the American people in 1995. "It is vital for the human family," he said, "that in continuing to seek advancement in many different fields -- science, business, education and art, and wherever else your creativity leads you -- America keeps compassion, generosity and concern for others at the very heart of its efforts."[5] That will be no easy task.

II. The Abolition of Man

9. Nations are not machines or equations. They are like ecosystems. A people's habits, beliefs, values and institutions intertwine like a root system. Poisoning one part will eventually poison it all. As a result, bad laws and bad court decisions produce degraded political thought and behavior, and vice versa. So it is with the legacy of *Roe vs. Wade*. *Roe* effectively legalized abortion throughout pregnancy for virtually any reason, or none at all. It is responsible for the grief of millions of women and men, and the killing of millions of unborn children in the past quarter century. Yet the weaknesses of the Supreme Court's 1973 reasoning are well known. They were acknowledged by the Supreme Court itself in the subsequent 1992 *Casey* decision, which could find no better reason to uphold *Roe* than the habits Roe itself created by surviving for 20 years.[6] The feebleness and confusion of the *Casey* decision flow directly out of *Roe*'s own confusion. They are part of the same root system. Taking a distorted "right to privacy" to new heights, and developing a new moral calculus to justify it, *Roe* has spread through the American political ecology with toxic results.

"In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible."
--George Orwell, Politics and the English Language

10. *Roe* effectively *rendered the definition of human personhood flexible and negotiable*. It also implicitly excluded unborn children from human status. In doing so, *Roe* helped create an environment in which infanticide -- a predictable next step along the continuum of killing -- is now open to serious examination. Thanks ultimately to *Roe*, some today speculate publicly and sympathetically why a number of young American women kill their newborn babies or leave them to die. Even the word "infanticide" is being replaced by new and less emotionally charged words like "neonaticide" (killing a newborn on the day of his or her birth) and "filicide" (killing the baby at some later point). Revising the name given to the killing *reduces its perceived gravity*. This is the ecology of law, moral reasoning and language in action. Bad law and defective moral reasoning produce the evasive language to justify evil. Nothing else can explain the verbal and ethical gymnastics required by elected officials to justify their support for partial-birth abortion, a procedure in which infants are brutally killed during the process of delivery. The same sanitized marketing is now deployed on behalf of physician-assisted suicide, fetal experimentation and human cloning. Each reduces the human person to a problem or an object. Each can trace its lineage in no small part to *Roe*.

11. Obviously *Roe* is only one of several social watersheds which have shaped the America of the late

1990s. But it is a uniquely destructive one. In the 25 years since Roe, our society's confusion about the relationship of law, moral reasoning and language has created more and more cynicism in the electorate. As words become unmoored from their meaning (as in "choice" or "terminating a pregnancy"), and as the ideas and ideals which bind us together erode, democratic participation inevitably declines. So too does a healthy and appropriate patriotism.

12. At Baltimore's Camden Yards, Pope John Paul spoke prophetically when he said: "Today the challenge facing America is to find freedom's fulfillment in truth; the truth that is intrinsic to human life created in God's image and likeness, the truth that is written on the human heart, the truth that can be known by reason and can therefore form the basis of a profound and universal dialogue among people about the direction they must give to their lives and their activities."[7]

III. We Hold These Truths to Be Self-Evident

13. We believe that universal understandings of freedom and truth are "written on the human heart." America's founders also believed this to be true. In 1776 John Dickinson, one of the framers of our Constitution, affirmed: "Our liberties do not come from charters; for these are only the declaration of pre-existing rights. They do not depend on parchments or seals, but come from the king of kings and the Lord of all the earth."[8] The words of the Declaration of Independence speak of the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," and proceed to make the historic assertion: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness ..." Today, more than two centuries of the American experiment have passed. We tend to take these words for granted. But for the founders, writing on the brink of armed revolution, these phrases were invested not just with their philosophy but with their lives. This is why they closed with a "firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence." The words of the Declaration of Independence illuminate the founding principles of the American Republic, principles explicitly grounded in unchanging truths about the human person.

> "For the power of Man to make himself what he pleases means, as we have seen, the power of some men to make other men what they please."
> --C.S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man

14. The principles of the Declaration were not fully reflected in the social or political structures of its own day. Then human slavery and other social injustices stood in tension to the high ideals the Founders articulated. Only after much time and effort have these contradictions been reduced. In a striking way, we see today a heightening of the tension between our nation's founding principles and political reality. We see this in diminishing respect for the inalienable right to life and in the elimination of legal protections for those who are most vulnerable. There can be no genuine justice in our society until

the truths on which our nation was founded are more perfectly realized in our culture and law.

15. One of those truths is our own essential creatureliness. Virtual reality and genetic science may give us the illusion of power, but we are not gods. We are not our own, or anyone else's, creator. Nor, for our own safety, should we ever seek to be. Even parents, entrusted with a special guardianship over new life, do not "own" their children any more than one adult can own another. And therein lies our only security. *No one but the Creator is the sovereign of basic human rights -- beginning with the right to life*. We are daughters and sons of the one God who, outside and above us all, grants us the freedom, dignity and rights of personhood which no one else can take away. Only in this context, the context of a Creator who authors our human dignity, do words like "truths" and "self-evident" find their ultimate meaning. Without the assumption that a Creator exists who has ordained certain irrevocable truths about the human person, no rights are "unalienable," and nothing about human dignity is axiomatic.

16. This does not make America sectarian. It does, however, underline the crucial role God's sovereignty has played in the architecture of American politics. While the founders were a blend of Enlightenment rationalists and traditional Christians, generations of Jews, Muslims, other religious groups and non-believers have all found a home in the United States. This is so because the tolerance of our system is rooted in the Jewish-Christian principle that even those who differ from one another in culture, appearance and faith *still share the same rights*. We believe that this principle still possesses the power to enlighten our national will.

17. The Second Vatican Council, in its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, praises those women and men who have a vocation to public office. It encourages active citizenship. It also reminds us that, "The political community . . . exists for the common good: This is its full justification and meaning, and the source of its specific and basic right to exist. The common good embraces all those conditions of social life which enable individuals, families and organizations to achieve complete and efficacious fulfillment" (74). In pursuing the common good, citizens should "cultivate a generous and loyal spirit of patriotism, but without narrow-mindedness . . . [they must also] be conscious of their specific and proper role in the political community: They should be a shining example by their sense of responsibility and their dedication to the common good . . ." (75).

18. As to the role of the Church in this process: ". . . The political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields. Nevertheless, both are devoted to the personal vocation of man, though under different titles . . . [yet] at all times and in all places, the Church should have the true freedom to teach the faith, to proclaim its teaching about society, to carry out its task among men without hindrance, *and to pass moral judgment even in matters relating to politics, whenever the fundamental rights of man or the salvation of souls requires it"* (76; emphasis added). Pope John Paul II elaborates on this responsibility in his 1988 apostolic exhortation, *The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World (Christifideles Laici)*: "The inviolability of the person, which is a reflection of the absolute inviolability of God, finds its primary and fundamental

expression in the inviolability of human life. Above all, the common outcry, which is justly made on behalf of human rights -- for example, the right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture -- is false and illusory if *the right to life*, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition of all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination . . . The human being is entitled to such rights in every phase of development, from conception until natural death, whether healthy or sick, whole or handicapped, rich or poor . . . [Moreover, if,] indeed, everyone has the mission and responsibility of acknowledging the personal dignity of every human being and of defending the right to life, some lay faithful are given particular title to this task: such as *parents, teachers, healthworkers and the many who hold economic and political power"* (38).

19. We believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a "Gospel of life." It invites all persons and societies to a new life lived abundantly in respect for human dignity. We believe that this Gospel is not only a complement to American political principles, but also the cure for the spiritual sickness now infecting our society. As Scripture says, no house can stand divided against itself (Lk 11:17). We cannot simultaneously commit ourselves to human rights and progress while eliminating or marginalizing the weakest among us. Nor can we practice the Gospel of life only as a private piety. American Catholics must live it *vigorously* and publicly, as a matter of national leadership and witness, or we will not live it at all.

IV. Living the Gospel of Life: the Virtues We Need

20. Bringing a respect for human dignity to practical politics can be a daunting task. There is such a wide spectrum of issues involving the protection of human life and the promotion of human dignity. Good people frequently disagree on which problems to address, which policies to adopt and how best to apply them. But for citizens and elected officials alike, the basic principle is simple: *We must begin with a commitment never to intentionally kill, or collude in the killing, of any innocent human life, no matter how broken, unformed, disabled or desperate that life may seem*. In other words, the choice of certain ways of acting is *always and radically incompatible* with the love of God and the dignity of the human person created in His image. Direct abortion is *never* a morally tolerable option. It is *always* a grave act of violence against a woman and her unborn child. This is so even when a woman does not see the truth because of the pressures she may be subjected to, often by the child's father, her parents or friends. Similarly, euthanasia and assisted suicide are *never* acceptable acts of mercy. They *always* gravely exploit the

> "It is impossible to further the common good without acknowledging and defending the right to life, upon which all the other inalienable rights of individuals are founded and from which they develop." --Pope John Paul II, The Gospel of Life

suffering and desperate, extinguishing life in the name of the "quality of life" itself. This same teaching against direct killing of the innocent condemns all direct attacks on innocent civilians in time of war.

21. Pope John Paul II has reminded us that we must respect every life, even that of criminals and unjust aggressors. It is increasingly clear in modern society that capital punishment is unnecessary to protect people's safety and the public order, so that cases where it may be justified are "very rare, if not practically non-existent." No matter how serious the crime, punishment that does not take life is "more in conformity with the dignity of the human person" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 56-7). Our witness to respect for life shines most brightly when we demand respect for each and every human life, including the lives of those who fail to show that respect for others. The antidote to violence is love, not more violence.

22. As we stressed in our 1995 statement *Political Responsibility*: "The application of Gospel values to real situations is an essential work of the Christian community." Adopting a consistent ethic of life, the Catholic Church promotes a broad spectrum of issues "seeking to protect human life and promote human dignity from the inception of life to its final moment."[9] Opposition to abortion and euthanasia does not excuse indifference to those who suffer from poverty, violence and injustice. Any politics of human life must work to resist the violence of war and the scandal of capital punishment. Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing, and health care. Therefore, Catholics should eagerly involve themselves as advocates for the weak and marginalized in all these areas. Catholic public officials are obliged to address each of these issues as they seek to build consistent policies which promote respect for the human person at all stages of life. *But being 'right' in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life.* Indeed, the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the 'rightness' of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community. If we understand the human person as the "temple of the Holy Spirit" -- the living house of God -- then these latter issues fall logically into place as the crossbeams and walls of that house. *All direct attacks on innocent human life, such as abortion and euthanasia, strike at the house's foundation*. These directly and immediately violate the human person's most fundamental right -- the right to life. Neglect of these issues is the equivalent of building our house on sand. Such attacks cannot help but lull the social conscience in ways ultimately destructive of other human rights. As Pope John Paul II reminds us, the command never to kill establishes a minimum which we must respect and from which we must start out "in order to say 'yes' over and over again, a 'yes' which will gradually embrace the *entire horizon of the good"* (*Evangelium Vitae*, 75).

23. Since the entry of Catholics into the U.S. political mainstream, believers have struggled to balance their faith with the perceived demands of democratic pluralism. As a result, some Catholic elected officials have adopted the argument that, while they personally oppose evils like abortion, they cannot force their religious views onto the wider society. This is seriously mistaken on several key

counts. First, regarding abortion, the point when human life begins is not a religious belief but a scientific fact -- a fact on which there is clear agreement even among leading abortion advocates. Second, the sanctity of human life is not merely Catholic doctrine but part of humanity's global ethical heritage, and our nation's founding principle. Finally, democracy is not served by silence. Most Americans would recognize the contradiction in the statement, "While I am personally opposed to slavery or racism or sexism I cannot force my personal view on the rest of society." *Real pluralism depends on people of conviction struggling vigorously to advance their beliefs by every ethical and legal means at their disposal.*

24. Today, Catholics risk cooperating in a false pluralism. Secular society will allow believers to have whatever moral convictions they please -- as long as they keep them on the private preserves of their consciences, in their homes and churches, and out of the public arena. Democracy is not a substitute for morality, nor a panacea for immorality. Its value stands -- or falls -- with the values which it embodies and promotes. *Only* tireless promotion of the truth about the human person can infuse democracy with the right values. This is what Jesus meant when He asked us to be leaven in society. American Catholics have long sought to assimilate into U.S. cultural life. But in assimilating, we have too often been digested. We have been *changed* by our culture too much, and we have *changed it not enough*. If we are leaven, we must bring to our culture the whole Gospel, which is a *Gospel of life and joy*. That is our vocation as believers. And there is no better place to start than promoting the beauty and sanctity of human life. Those who would claim to promote the cause of life through violence or the threat of violence contradict this Gospel at its core.

25. Scripture calls us to "be doers of the word and not hearers only . . . [for] faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (Jas 1:22, 2:17). Jesus Himself directs us to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you . . ." (Mt 28:19-20). Life in Christ is a life of *active witness*. It demands *moral leadership*. Each and every person baptized in the truth of the Catholic faith is a member of the "people of life" sent by God to evangelize the world.

26. God is always ready to answer our prayers for help with the virtues we need to do His will. First and foremost we need the *courage and the honesty* to speak the truth about human life, no matter how high the cost to ourselves. The great lie of our age is that we are powerless in the face of the compromises, structures and temptations of mass culture. But we are not powerless. We can make a difference. We belong to the Lord, in Him is our strength, and through His grace, we can change the world. We also need *the humility* to listen well to both friend and opponent on the abortion issue, learning from each and forgetting ourselves. We need *the perseverance* to continue the struggle for the protection of human life, no matter what the setbacks, trusting in God and in the ultimate fruitfulness of the task He has called us to. We need *the prudence* to know when and how to act in the public arena -- and also to recognize and dismiss that fear of acting which postures as prudence itself. And finally we need the great foundation of every apostolic life: *faith, hope and charity*. *Faith* not in moral or political abstractions, but in the personal presence of God; *hope* not in our own ingenuity, but in His goodness

and mercy; and *love* for others, including those who oppose us, rooted in the love God showers down on us.

27. These virtues, like the *Gospel of Life* which they help animate, have serious implications for every Christian involved in any way in the public life of the nation.

28 . As *bishops*, we have the responsibility to call Americans to conversion, including political leaders, and especially those publicly identified as Catholic. As the Holy Father reminds us in *The Splendor of the Truth (Veritatis Splendor)*: ". . . [It] is part of our pastoral ministry to see to it that [the Church's] moral teaching is faithfully handed down, and to have recourse to appropriate measures to ensure that the faithful are guarded from every doctrine and theory contrary to it" (116). As chief teachers in the Church, we must therefore explain, persuade, correct and admonish those in leadership positions who contradict the Gospel of life through their actions and policies. Catholic public officials who disregard Church teaching on the inviolability of the human person indirectly collude in the taking of innocent life. A private call to conversion should always be the first step in dealing with these leaders. Through prayer, through patiently speaking the truth in love, and by the witness of our lives, we must strive always to open their hearts to the God-given dignity of the unborn and of all vulnerable persons. So also we must remind these leaders of their duty to exercise genuine moral leadership in society. They do this not by unthinking adherence to public opinion polls or by repeating empty pro-choice slogans, but by educating and sensitizing themselves and their constituents to the humanity of the unborn child. At the same time we need to redouble our efforts to evangelize and catechize our people on the dignity of life and the wrongness of abortion. Nonetheless, some Catholic officials may exclude themselves from the truth by refusing to open their minds to the Church's witness. In all cases, bishops have the duty and pastoral responsibility to continue to challenge those officials on the issue in question and persistently call them to a change of heart. As bishops we reflect particularly on the words of the Office of Readings:

> *Let us be neither dogs that do not bark nor silent onlookers nor paid servants who run away before the wolf. Instead, let us be careful shepherds watching over Christ's flock. Let us preach the whole of God's plan to the powerful and the humble, to rich and to poor, to men of every rank and age, as far as God gives us the strength, in season and out of season, as St. Gregory writes in his book of Pastoral Instruction.*[10]

29. Priests, religious, catechists, Catholic school teachers, family life ministers and theologians all share, each in their appropriate way, in the Church's task of forming the Catholic faithful in a reverence for the sanctity of life. We call them to a renewed commitment to that task. In their words and example, they should witness loyally and joyfully to the truth that every human life, at every stage of development, is a gift from God. *Physicians, nurses and healthcare workers* can touch the lives of women and girls who may be considering abortion with practical assistance, counseling and adoption alternatives. Equally important, they should be conscious evangelizers of their own professions, witnessing by word and example that God is the Lord of life.

30. Catholics who are privileged to serve in public leadership positions have an obligation to place their faith at the heart of their public service, particularly on issues regarding the sanctity and dignity of human life. Thomas More, the former chancellor of England who preferred to give his life rather than betray his Catholic convictions, went to his execution with the words, "I die the king's good servant, but God's first." In the United States in the late 1990s, elected officials safely keep their heads. But some will face a political penalty for living their public office in accord with their pro-life convictions. To those who choose this path, we assure them that their course is just, they save lives through their witness, and God and history will not forget them. Moreover, the risk of witness should not be exaggerated, and the power of witness should not be underestimated. In an age of artifice, many voters are hungry for substance. They admire and support political figures who speak out sincerely for their moral convictions. For our part we commend Catholic and other public officials who, with courage and determination, use their positions of leadership to promote respect for all human life.

31. We urge those Catholic officials who choose to depart from Church teaching on the inviolability of human life in their public life to consider the consequences for their own spiritual well being, as well as the scandal they risk by leading others into serious sin. We call on them to reflect on the grave contradiction of assuming public roles and presenting themselves as credible Catholics when their actions on fundamental issues of human life are not in agreement with Church teaching. No public official, especially one claiming to be a faithful and serious Catholic, can responsibly advocate for or actively support direct attacks on innocent human life. Certainly there are times when it may be impossible to overturn or prevent passage of a law which allows or promotes a moral evil -- such as a law allowing the destruction of nascent human life. In such cases, an elected official, whose position in favor of life is known, could seek legitimately to limit the harm done by the law. However, no appeal to policy, procedure, majority will or pluralism ever excuses a public official from defending life to the greatest extent possible. As is true of leaders in all walks of life, no political leader can evade accountability for his or her exercise of power (*Evangelium Vitae*, 73-4). Those who justify their inaction on the grounds that abortion is the law of the land need to recognize that there is a higher law, the law of God. No human law can validly contradict the Commandment: "Thou shalt not kill."

32. The Gospel of Life must be proclaimed, and human life defended, in all places and all times. The arena for moral responsibility includes not only the halls of government, but the voting booth as well. Laws that permit abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide are profoundly unjust, and we should work peacefully and tirelessly to oppose and change them. Because they are unjust they cannot bind citizens in conscience, be supported, acquiesced in, or recognized as valid. Our nation cannot countenance the continued existence in our society of such fundamental violations of human rights.

33. We encourage *all citizens*, particularly Catholics, to embrace their citizenship not merely as a duty and privilege, but as an opportunity meaningfully to participate *in building the culture of life*. Every voice matters in the public forum. Every vote counts. Every act of responsible citizenship is an exercise of significant individual power. We must exercise that power in ways that defend human life, especially

those of God's children who are unborn, disabled or otherwise vulnerable. We get the public officials we deserve. Their virtue -- or lack thereof -- is a judgment not only on them, but on us. Because of this, we urge our fellow citizens to *see beyond party politics, to analyze campaign rhetoric critically, and to choose their political leaders according to principle, not party affiliation or mere self-interest.*

34. We urge parents to recall the words of the Second Vatican Council and our Holy Father in On the Family (Familiaris Consortio), that the family is "the first and vital cell of society" (42).[11] As the family goes, so goes our culture. Parents are the primary educators of their children, especially in the important areas of human sexuality and the transmission of human life. They shape society toward a respect for human life by first *being open to new life themselves*; then by forming their children -- through personal example -- with a reverence for the poor, the elderly and developing life in the womb. Families which live the Gospel of life are *important agents of evangelization through their witness*. But additionally, they should organize "to see that the laws and institutions of the state not only do not offend, but support and actively defend the rights and duties of the family," for the purpose of transforming society and advancing the sanctity of life (44).

35. Women have a unique role in the transmission and nurturing of human life. They can best understand the bitter trauma of abortion and the hollowness and sterility at the heart of the vocabulary of "choice." Therefore, we ask women to assume a special role in promoting the Gospel of life with a new pro-life feminism. Women are uniquely qualified to counsel and support other women facing unexpected pregnancies, and they have been in the vanguard of establishing and staffing the more than 3000 pregnancy aid centers in the United States. They, in a way more fruitful than any others, can help elected officials to understand that any political agenda which hopes to uphold equal rights for all, must affirm the equal rights of every child, born and unborn. They can remind us that our nation's declaration of God-given rights, coupled with the command "Thou shalt not kill," are the starting points of true freedom. To choose any other path is to contradict our own identity as a nation dedicated to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

36. We commend all *who proclaim and serve the Gospel of Life*. By their peaceful activism, education and prayer, they witness to God's truth and embody our Lord's command to love one another as He loved us. By their service to women who have experienced abortion, they bring His peace and consolation. We urge them to persevere in this difficult work, and not to be discouraged. Like the Cross of our Lord, faithful dedication to the Gospel of Life is a "sign of contradiction" in our times.

37. As Pope John Paul II has said: "It is a tribute to the Church and to the openness of American society that so many Catholics in the United States are involved in political life." He reminds us that "democracy is . . . a moral adventure, a continuing test of a people's capacity to govern themselves in ways that serve the common good and the good of individual citizens. The survival of a particular democracy depends not only on its institutions, but to an even greater extent on the spirit which inspires and permeates its procedures for legislating, administering and judging. *The future of democracy in fact*

depends on a culture capable of forming men and women who are prepared to defend certain truths and values."[12]

38. As we conclude the American century and approach a new era for our own nation and the world, we believe that the purpose of the United States remains hopeful and worthy. In the words of Robert Frost, our vocation is to take *"the road less traveled," the road of human freedom rooted in law; law which is rooted, in turn, in the truth about the sanctity of the human person*. But the future of a nation is decided by every new generation. Freedom always implies the ability to choose between two roads: one which leads to life; the other, death (Dt 30:19). *It is now our turn to choose*. We appeal to all people of the United States, especially those in authority, and among them most especially Catholics, to understand this critical choice before us. We urge all persons of good will to work earnestly to bring about the cultural transformation we need, a true renewal in our public life and institutions based on the sanctity of all human life. And finally, as God entrusted His Son to Mary nearly 2,000 years ago for the redemption of the world, we close this letter today by entrusting to Mary all our people's efforts to witness the Gospel of life effectively in the public square.

> *Mary, patroness of America, renew in us a love for the beauty and sanctity of the human person from conception to natural death; and as your Son gave His life for us, help us to live our lives serving others. Mother of the Church, Mother of our Savior, open our hearts to the Gospel of life, protect our nation, and make us witnesses to the truth.*

Endnotes

[1] Henry Luce, "The American Century," *Life* (February 17, 1941).

[2] Pope John Paul II, Departure from Baltimore/Washington International Airport, Departure Remarks, October 8, 1995; 25 *Origins*, p. 318 (October 19, 1995).

[3] Pope John Paul II, Homily in Giants Stadium, October 5, 1995; 25 *Origins*, p. 305 (October 19, 1995).

[4] Pope John Paul II, Homily in Giants Stadium, October 5, 1995; 25 *Origins*, p. 303 (October 19, 1995).

[5] Pope John Paul II, Arrival in Newark, Airport Remarks, October 4, 1995; 25 *Origins*, p. 301 (October 19, 1995).

[6] In *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992), the Supreme Court upheld most of the challenged provisions of a Pennsylvania law regulating abortion. The Court declined,

however, to overturn what it called the "central holding" of *Roe v. Wade* and said: "[F]or two decades of economic and social developments, people have organized intimate relationships and made choices that define their views of themselves and their places in society, in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail." 505 U.S. at 856.

[7] Pope John Paul II, Homily at Camden Yards, "What Freedom Is," October 8, 1995; 25 *Origins*, p. 314 (October 19, 1995).

[8] Pope John Paul II, Remarks on accepting the credentials of the U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, December 16, 1997; 27 *Origins*, p. 488 (January 8, 1998) [citing C. Herman Pritchett, *The American Constitution* (McGraw-Hill 1977), p. 2].

[9] Administrative Board, Unites States Catholic Conference, *Political Responsibility: Proclaiming the Gospel of Life, Protecting the Least Among Us, and Pursuing the Common Good* (1995), p. 12.

[10] Boniface, Ep. 78: MGH, Epistolae, 3, 352, 354; from *Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co. 1975).

[11] Cf. also *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (Apostolicam Actuositatem)*, 11.

[12] Pope John Paul II, Ad Limina Remarks to the Bishops of Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas (June 27, 1998); 28 *Origins*, p. 282 (October 1, 1998).

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